



Mercedes-Benz 300CE Cabriolet

An \$80,000 Untertürkheim air show.

BY STEVEN L. THOMPSON

Here's an interesting question: Are there about a thousand Americans prepared to pay Mercedes-Benz more than eighty grand each for a four-seat, two-ton convertible with a "semi-automatic" soft top that uses up a lot of trunk space and requires that "passengers in the rear seat must bend forward to remain clear of the rear window's path of travel"?

Well, maybe. Because the 300CE Cabrio is probably going to be the world's safest four-seat convertible. And whereas there are plenty of folks who think that the words "safe" and "fun" are mutually exclusive where cars are concerned, the people who sell cars to M-B zip codes

obviously think otherwise. Hence the 300CE Cabriolet, a car you can think of as the automotive equivalent of safe sex.

Based on the existing 300CE coupe platform (*C/D*, April 1991), the Cabrio's main claim to fame is not just its kinematically complicated top, but the rollover protection system built into the scuttle area behind the rear passengers. Like the pivoting rollover bar in the SL roadsters, this spring-loaded device deploys in about a third of a second whenever the system's computer detects a combination of body roll, rear wheel travel, or sudden horizontal acceleration that typifies a front, side, or rear collision.

Unlike the roll bar in the SL system,

the Cabrio uses what looks like a pair of telescoping reinforced headrests to provide rollover protection. (These can also be manually deployed by front or rear-seat passengers.) Together with the massively reinforced body shell, A-pillars, and windshield frame, this system creates a "survival space" for all the passengers, while providing the Cabrio with the sleek look of a convertible from a simpler time, when safety did not sell cars. Back then—say, two decades or so ago—this car's anti-lock brakes, dual air bags, computer-controlled in-line six, four-speed automatic transmission, and 140-mph top speed were the stuff of techno-dreams.

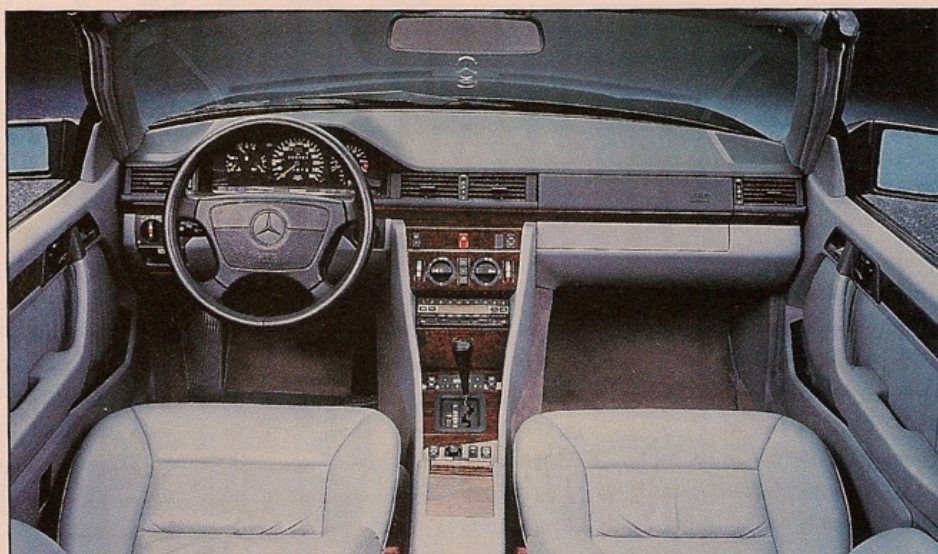
The object of all this techno-wizardry

was to build a convertible that gives away nothing to the coupe in looks, comfort, handling, or safety. As any conversion shop will attest, this isn't done simply by lopping off the top. It requires total reengineering.

Mercedes thinks the car you see here fills the bill so well there isn't even a hard top available, because "it's not necessary." Likewise, American 300CE droptops will all be configured just like the coupe, with leather upholstery, power everything, eight-hole alloy wheels, and a center armrest ready for a cellular phone. So if you liked the 300CE but wanted a convertible, this is your car. (But the coupe remains in the lineup, of course.)

Dimensionally, the major differences between the coupe and cabrio are the convertible's loss of trunk space to accommodate the folded top (using up three of the coupe's thirteen cubic feet of capacity), a small loss of rear-seat room, and a big weight gain, due to the structural stiffening needed to make the convertible nearly as torsionally rigid as the hard top.

During our brief preview drive in Germany, we could tell these measures paid off, because the cabrio proved to be virtually as solid as the coupe, with the top up or down. We also found the new Cabrio's 217-horsepower 3.2-liter engine, which also powers the 1993 300CE coupe, to have significantly improved low-end punch over the 3.0-liter used in last year's coupe. And that was with the U.S.-spec four-speed automatic rather than the European five-speed manual or automatic. Handling was uniformly predictable and stable, whether we were slicing through truck convoys at 140 mph on the autobahn or drifting through mountain switchbacks. The best thing anyone can say of any new Mercedes is that it feels and works like a Mercedes. Which the 300CE Cabriolet most definitely does,



even in the way its top does its job.

The top won't work unless the car is moving at less than 6 mph. So you lower the top by halting, unlocking the two windshield-frame lock handles, giving the top's front lateral bow a little push to get it past the no-leverage point, then holding a console-mounted switch while you watch the fun, which Mercedes says takes twenty seconds.

First, all four windows automatically lower into the body. Then the rear bottom edge of the top disengages, the steel top-compartment panel pivots up, and the top begins its powered folding and swiveling. It's during this phase that rear-seat passengers must bend forward to avoid being struck on the head by the top of the rear window as it pitches forward before it and the rest of the top reverses direction and tucks neatly into its compartment. The cover then closes, and the windows return to their former positions.

The top itself is as complex and technically fascinating as its kinematics. Almost an inch of sound-deadening padding

between the inner and outer fabric layers keeps the cabin sedan-quiet, and a clever sliding rear fabric tensioner defeats flutter and keeps the all-glass rear window perfectly aligned. Mercedes says it has tested the top through 20,000 operational cycles without a failure.

What is not so clear is whether or not the Cabrio's engineering produces benefits to balance its costs. A fixed rollover bar would have solved the "survival space" problem much less expensively than the on-demand system, the savings being evident in weight, resources, performance, reliability, maintenance, and, of course, money. Lots of it. But taking the easy way out is not the Mercedes way, nor does it ensure exclusivity, a key part of the company's marketing strategy.

Because fewer than 1000 Cabrios will come to North America in 1993, and because this car stands absolutely alone in its price range, its exclusivity is assured. Perhaps as important, this car serves as the latest reply to the question of how Mercedes will hold onto its spot at the apex of the automotive pyramid. Now, as always at Untertürkheim, the tactic is: Teutonic taste and technology *über alles*. ●

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 4-passenger, 2-door convertible

Estimated base price: \$82,000

Engine type: DOHC 24-valve 6-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, Bosch HFM Motronic engine-control system with port fuel injection

Displacement.....195 cu in, 3199cc

Power (SAE net).....217 bhp @ 5500 rpm

Transmission.....4-speed automatic with lockup torque converter

Wheelbase.....106.9 in

Length.....183.9 in

Width.....68.5 in

Height.....54.8 in

Curb weight.....4025 lb

Manufacturer's performance ratings:

Zero to 60 mph.....8.6 sec

Top speed.....140 mph

C/D projected fuel economy:

EPA city driving.....17 mpg

EPA highway driving.....21 mpg

